

Hearing Sonat Birnecker talk about the early days of starting her family's business, you might think the pursuit was the result of a booze-induced professional crisis.

And you wouldn't be that far off.

Dr. Sonat Birnecker Hart and her husband, Robert, abandoned highly cultivated, yet demanding and time-consuming, careers in Washington, DC (a native of Austria, Robert worked in the country's embassy, while Sonat was a tenured professor) to start a small craft distillery in Chicago—the city's first since Prohibition.

In reality, the family's Koval Distillery, which was established in 2008 in the Windy City's Andersonville neighborhood, was much more of a blending of the family's history with their personal priorities than the delusions of a husband and wife in the bowels of a three-day bender.

"We were living in DC and we decided we wanted a completely different quality of life, so we left our jobs, which, of course, we had to get PhDs to get," Sonat joked, "and we wanted to go back to Chicago, which is a super-livable city. We said, 'Let's do something different. Let's work together. Let's have a family business.'"

The Birneckers decided to tap Robert's extensive

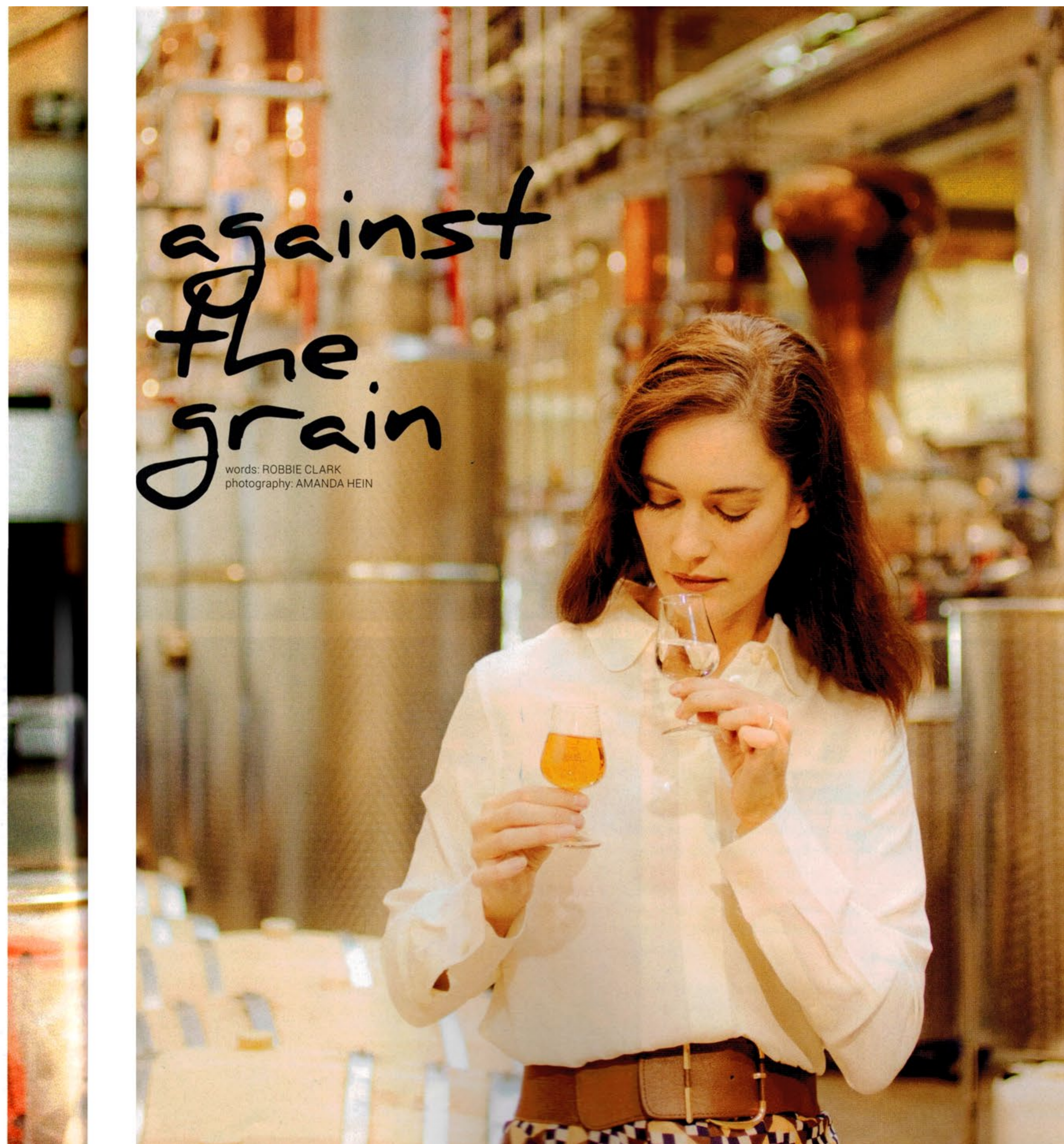
knowledge of distilling for their new career path. In Austria, his family had been involved in the industry for generations, and Robert grew up making ciders and wines and liqueurs at his grandparents' facility near Salzburg. "We decided instead of buying a house, we would put everything we had, every single penny, into the distillery," she said.

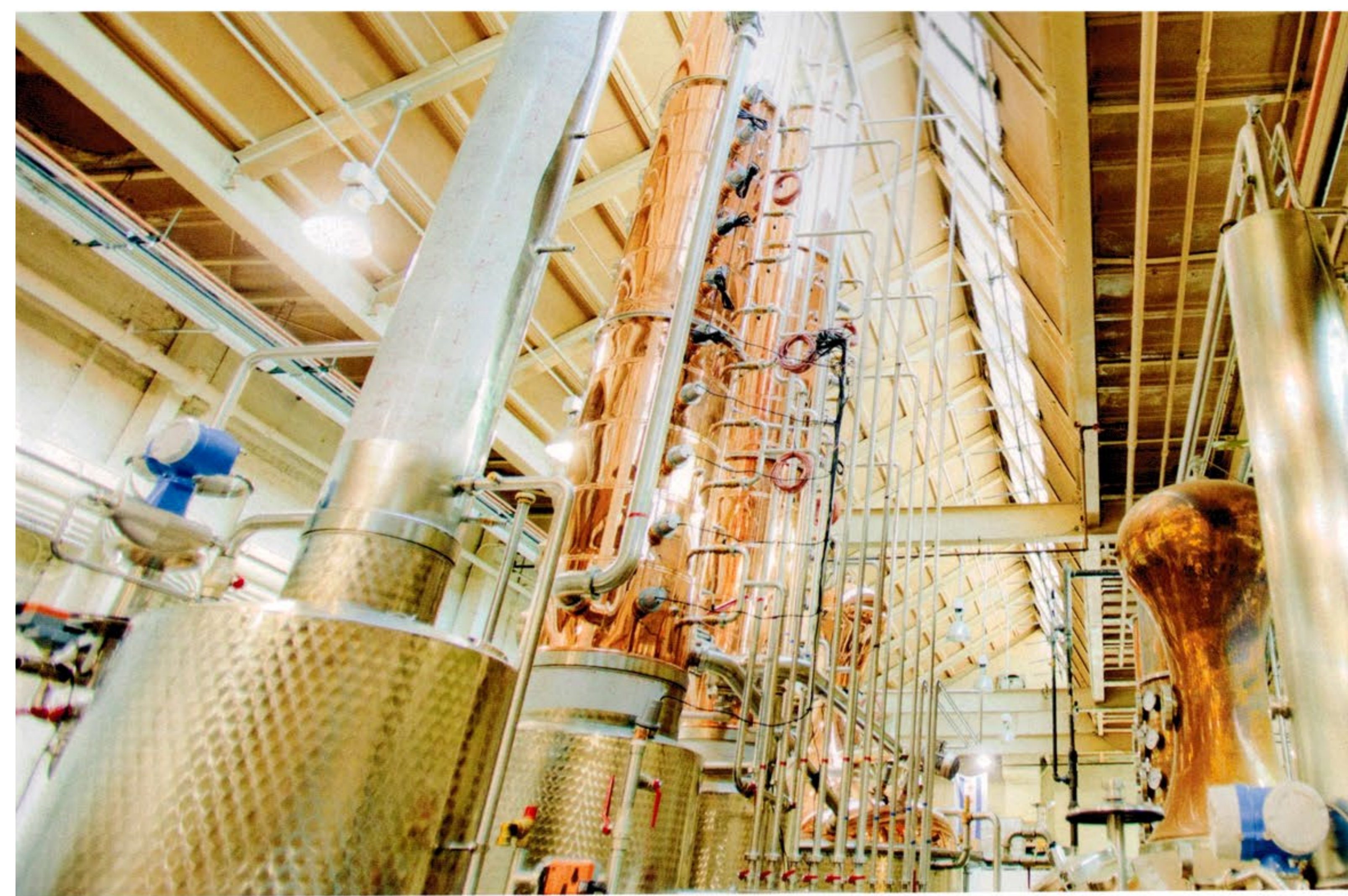
Not only did they forgo buying a house, the Birneckers, with their young child, crashed at Sonat's parents' house for over a year to save money. They renovated a small factory warehouse for their distillery and bought a 300-liter still and began producing a variety of single-grain white whiskies. When the economic collapse hit later in the year, they worried that their small business venture may fall victim to bad timing. Instead, they got a reminder about the resiliency of the alcohol industry in a down economy.

"People drink when it's good, people drink when it's bad," Sonat said, referring to an oft-quoted industry axiom.

against the grain

words: ROBBIE CLARK
photography: AMANDA HEIN





The Birneckers differentiated themselves from industry behemoths by embracing an inventive and experimental method for creating unique products. Koval sources all of their grains from organic Midwestern farms and relies on interesting and alternative grains for their mash bills, such as millet and spelt, and they mill all their grains on-site. Along with whiskies and brandies, they also have a line of exotic liqueurs, with flavors like rose hip and chrysanthemum honey. This DIY approach to distilling and reliance on nearby ingredients harkens back to Robert's family's methods in Austria, where thousands of local distillers have created distinct regional varieties of alcohol. Within three years Koval Distillery outgrew its initial space, and a second location, a 10,000-square-foot facility up the street, was procured. Sonat says that the company is still experiencing growing pains and hopes to acquire a much larger location within the next three years, if not sooner.

Koval Distillery got its start before American palettes became intoxicated with the craft distilling revolution—before bartenders started referring to themselves as mixologists—and it's not a stretch to say the Birneckers were instrumental in the trend. While they were trying to establish their distillery and find the necessary equipment, they discovered that there was scant information available.

"We found that there was very little infrastructure for small-scale distilleries or craft distilleries in the United States, because Prohibition completely obliterated the machinery and the knowledge."

Fortunately Koval Distillery could rely on Robert's experience for their production, as well as his family's European connections for equipment, but the void in available information gave the family an idea for another product they could bottle. Instead of keeping the generational knowledge secret, they would help foster the niche industry by establishing a consulting company to help other would-be small distillers get started.

Sonat says over the past five years she and her husband have taught over 1,500 people in their distilling workshops and have assisted in founding, from the ground up, almost 50 craft distilleries in the United States and Canada.

All the while, Koval Distillery has relished in the country's newfound obsession with craft distilling. People curious about the industry come out for tours and their products are available in nearly 2,000 retail locations across the country (and now even internationally, in Austria).

"When you're small, you can be more creative," she said. "It's a fun time to be a part of this industry, because I think there's a lot of creativity out there, and I think that it's going to put America on the map in a way that it wasn't in regards to spirits." ®

